



Press Office: (202) 226-0853
Tuesday, July 9, 2013

Rep. George Miller (D-CA) Opening Statement at Committee Hearing on Improving Higher Education through Innovation

WASHINGTON, DC -- Below are the prepared remarks of U.S. Rep. George Miller (D-CA), the senior Democrat on the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, for the committee hearing on improving higher education through innovation.

Good morning, Chairman Kline. We meet today to examine ways to improve higher education.

We will look at innovations from around the country, developed by states and schools alike, to make college more accessible and more affordable and to improve retention and completion rates. These discussions will hopefully inform our efforts to reauthorize the Higher Education Act – so that federal policy can promote and support innovations that benefit students.

But there's an elephant in this room that we cannot ignore. While we'd like to start looking to the future, Congress has failed students miserably in the present. We need to fix that.

One week ago, interest rates for more than 7.2 million students doubled from 3.4 percent to 6.8 percent. This should not have happened.

With the job market still recovering, interest rates at historic lows, and student loan debt at a record high \$1.1 trillion, we should not be asking students with the greatest need to be burdened by higher loan costs.

Because Congress has not acted, this rate increase will cost borrowers an additional \$1,000 per student, per loan. These borrowers are students like 28-year-old Brandon Anderson.

Brandon had a difficult upbringing. He dropped out of high school and lived on his own because of family issues. He joined the army. He completed two tours of duty in Iraq. And next May he will graduate with a bachelor's degree from Georgetown University.

Unfortunately, even while getting help from the G.I. Bill and significant aid from his school, Brandon is set to graduate with nearly \$25,000 in student loan debt. And thanks to this Congress's inaction, Brandon will pay double the interest on next year's student loans.

Brandon's loan debt has already caused him to forgo his dream of owning his first home before age 30 and abandon even more immediate needs like helping out his younger sister.

This Congress has not done right by Brandon and the millions of other students who will graduate with mountains of debt. What the Congress has done so far is inexcusable. The House passed a Republican bill that featured bait and switch rates that actually made college more expensive – even more expensive than letting the rates double.

Democrats offered a proposal that would freeze interest rates at 3.4 percent for two years, while Congress considers long-term, comprehensive solutions to address rising college costs and affordability, during the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act.

But our proposal was not allowed a vote on the House floor. And neither was President Obama's plan. The House majority even blocked a vote on that.

At every corner, and specifically in the Senate and in the House Rules Committee, Republicans have blocked consideration of any bill that would provide debt relief to students, insisting instead that students be taxed higher interest rates to pay down the deficit.

So, if we want to improve access and affordability in higher education, our immediate job today, as members of the one institution with the power to do so, should be to reverse the interest rate hike on 7.2 million college students.

That's why, two weeks ago, after efforts to stop the rate hike had clearly stalled, my colleagues and I introduced the Keep Student Loans Affordable Act of 2013. It is a one-year stop gap measure to keep rates low while all parties work out their differences on a longer term solution.

And longer term, comprehensive solutions to rising college costs are critically needed. Those solutions will take time and effort. Congress, states, and institutions must work together to examine cost structures and ensure that we do not price students out of a higher education.

A full reauthorization of HEA should promote affordability, retention and completion. Through cost-saving measures like redesigning courses, recognizing prior learning, and making better use of education technology, institutions can keep costs down to provide greater affordability for students.

For example, the University of Maryland system integrated course redesign to increase class size, but continue to actively engage students in their studies. Arizona University, Western Governors' University, and Southern New Hampshire University, among others, are beginning to look beyond seat time and provide competency-based degrees - potentially shortening students' time to achieve a degree.

And, many institutions are going online to reach a broader audience, and provide low-cost, high quality education to students. These are positive steps and I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today about how they are utilizing technology and other innovations on campus to reduce costs for students.

In the meantime, we can make a difference right now by acting to keep rates low at least another year.

I joined other members on June 28 in formally asking for a special meeting of the committee to mark up the Keep Student Loans Affordable Act – but received no response.

We can schedule that markup right now, if a majority of the committee signs the special meeting notice. I have that notice right here. All Democratic members have signed. We only need three members from the other side of the aisle to sign this document, and we can then move legislation to reverse the rate hike.

Students need interest rate relief now and Congress needs to act today to reverse this increase.

We cannot let the American Dream become a dream permanently deferred for millions of college graduates drowning in debt. We counted on people like Brandon Anderson in Iraq. Now they are counting on us. Let's get this done.

I yield back.

[House Education and the Workforce Committee Democrats](#)